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21 July 1967

Reported Presence of US Prisoners of War
In the Hanoi Power Plant

1. A CIA memorandum prepared on 5 July for Mr. Walt Rostow on the subject of POWs in Hanoi is attached. In essence, it states that it is unlikely the North Vietnamese would put US prisoners in a bombing target area. The memo also states that if the initial report were intended as a signal to the US, it would shortly be followed by other signals.
2. The absence of any further "signals" in the more than two weeks since the initial very weak "signal" raises further doubt that the original report was officially inspired. Communist propaganda in reaction to official US concern voiced over the status of Gustav Hertz and all US prisoners in the hands of the Vietnamese Communists has been seeking to allay suspicions that the prisoners are in danger and has, instead, stressed the "humane" treatment being given such prisoners. Three US prisoners being held in North Vietnam were shown on Polish TV on 17 July, apparently to demonstrate how well they are being treated. The Bulgarian news agency on 18 July stated that the DRV Government has given proof of "the good treatment" being given captured pilots.
3. A close examination of aerial photography of the Hanoi power plant fails to disclose any indication that US POWs are being held there. It is improbable that any substantial number of POWs are being housed in the main buildings of the power plant. The transformer house, boiler house, and generator hall of a power plant are typically crowded with equipment and the presence of more than a few POWs would interfere with normal operations. At the Hanoi power plant, they would also interfere with some repair activities that are still under way.

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4. Aerial photography shows that 300 to 600 feet west of the main buildings of the power plant there are some one-story sheds that probably are used for light repair activities and storage. These buildings could be used to house substantial numbers of POWs. In addition, there are a number of other buildings (function unknown) in the immediate neighborhood of the plant that are large enough to hold substantial numbers of POWs. Aerial photography (and available ground reporting) fails to reveal, however, any watch towers, major cleared areas, or fences that would be expected to be found near POW compounds.

5. The possibility that small numbers of POWs are being held in or near the power plant cannot be ruled out. If the North Vietnamese desired to deter additional air attacks against the Hanoi power plant by housing POWs in or near this installation, however, it is probable that they would recognize that the hostage value and credibility of their tactic would be greatly increased by erecting a few fences or watch towers clearly visible in aerial photography.

Attachments:

- Copy of memorandum dated 5 July 1967
- Photo of Hanoi Power Plant

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5 July 1967

SUBJECT: Reported Presence of US POWs in Hanoi
Power Plant

1. This report could be a calculated effort on the part of the North Vietnamese to get the US to cease its air strikes on the Hanoi power plant. If it is an officially inspired story, we would expect to hear it again shortly. It should be noted, however, that this kind of rumor was floating around Hanoi in late 1966 but was never followed up by the regime. There need not be any truth to the statement [redacted] that US prisoners are housed in the power plant. Hanoi may believe that the report itself will suffice to result in at least a temporary halt to the attacks on the power plant. If this ploy works, Hanoi may be encouraged to try floating similar rumors in regard to other key installations.

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2. Coming through this unofficial channel, Hanoi can always deny the validity of the report. This is important to the North Vietnamese, who learned the hard way about world and particularly US public reaction to threats against US prisoners. The public outcry against Hanoi's threat to try US prisoners as war criminals in July 1966 was a major factor in North Vietnam's backing down quickly and affirming publicly that its policy was to treat US prisoners "humanely."

3. On balance, it is unlikely that Hanoi has, as yet, actually placed US prisoners in a target that is being bombed. They have never resorted to this tactic in the past, despite the fact that any number of key installations have been struck. Moreover, the Hanoi power plant is not significantly more important to the North Vietnamese than other targets that have been hit. Thus, there would appear to be no particular reason for the North Vietnamese to run the risk of provoking a wave of adverse publicity in order to protect the already heavily damaged plant.

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